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Chris Fink

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Down to a Soundless Sea

Thomas Steinbeck.

New York: Ballantine Books, 2002.

283 pp Cloth \$24.95

Reviewed by Chris Fink

Thomas Steinbeck's first book, *Down to a Soundless Sea*, is labeled a collection of stories, though it is more accurately a collection of seven tales, three of which are novella length. It is worthwhile to note the distinction between the short story per se and the tale so readers won't believe they are getting a book of short stories in the modern sense. The term *tales* is a looser term that generally refers to any short narrative—either factual

John Steinbeck
and Thom

or fictitious—while the term *short story* implies a conscious and rather firm set of criteria particular to the genre. Thomas Steinbeck writes in his author's note about his father's love of a "ripping good yarn" and his affection for "tall-tale-spinners." *Down to a Soundless Sea* would have satisfied the elder Steinbeck's appetite for both—and it should satisfy the contemporary reader interested in Steinbeck country as well.

Steinbeck notes that these tales have their antecedents in the ancestral and regional oral tradition of the Steinbeck family and Monterey between 1900 and 1930. Some of this turf—and this era—have of course been covered by a Steinbeck before. The characters, the setting, and even the style bear the hallmark of the elder Steinbeck. The book effectively silences, then, those who would broach the question of influence. This work is both homage and addendum to the work of the elder Steinbeck, and for that it is both admirable and interesting. *Down to a Soundless Sea*, like any good John Steinbeck title, is peopled with immigrants, scoundrels, doctors, cowhands, pirates, layabouts, and damsels in dire need. The younger Steinbeck has his father's love of the working man and the details of ranch life and rural patois; his keen rendering of the myriad details of everyday life in fin de siècle Big Sur is one of the principal bounties of this book.

Some of the tales in *Down to a Soundless Sea* read as if they were stories John Steinbeck told but never wrote down. In "The Wool Gatherer," for instance, John Steinbeck is featured as a character: an adolescent working on a Big Sur ranch who squanders his summer wages tracking a grizzly bear he thinks he's seen. The boy is bookish and given to "wool gathering"—here a colloquial euphemism for daydreaming or wasting time—and he is desperate to authenticate his sighting in order to prove himself and his vision to the ranch hands and owner. The story is told in the omniscient point of view—like all the works in this collection—and opens with a description of the bear, thus corroborating the young John Steinbeck's vision.

Many of the stories explore supernatural themes related to Native American culture; the younger Steinbeck's focus falls squarely on the Big Sur Native American tribes, the Rumsen and the Esselen. "The Night Guide," for example, seems to be an anecdotal retelling of a Native American myth about the supernatural vision and experience of a young mixed-blood.

In "The Dark Watcher"—the best story in the book in terms of form, character development, and aesthetic achievement—follows the character of Solomon Gill, a San Jose State University anthropology professor who leaves the ivory tower of academia to conduct field research in Big Sur. There the professor encounters a "dark watcher," reminiscent of those shadowy forms that haunted the Santa Lucia mountains in one of John Steinbeck's best short stories, "Flight." Gill is effectively driven out of the mountains by the specter of a "dark watcher" just as he is on the verge of making an important archaeological discovery. Gill's interest in native culture conflicts with his fear of "childhood images of bloody scalps, burning cabins and waves of screaming, painted braves." This internal conflict—borne out through character thought and action—makes Gill one of the most complex and satisfying characters in the book.

John Steinbeck suffered no modernist crisis of representation and Thomas too seems unafflicted. The authorial, omniscient voice that dominates John Steinbeck's books also dominates here. There is no use of the first-person perspective and precious little use of unified or even limited narration. This is somewhat jarring to the modern ear and keeps us emotionally distant from the characters and their conflicts. Thomas Steinbeck qualifies this choice by stating that the main difficulty in writing historical fiction in the oral tradition is keeping a fidelity to the "mode and color of the original narration." Still, a variation in narrative positioning would have been refreshing in a book that relies so heavily on omniscient exposition and summary rather than scene, dialogue, and character thought.

As a work of historical fiction, however, *Down to a Soundless Sea* succeeds in conveying a wealth of local history and lore, and Thomas Steinbeck's insistent use of supernatural elements within the framework of realistic, culturally diverse narratives broadens and complicates the reader's sense of what is real and what is natural.

CHRIS FINK is assistant professor of English at San Jose State University and faculty advisor to Reed Magazine. His fiction appears in several journals including *Alaska Quarterly Review*, *Hayden's Ferry Review*, *Malahat Review*, *The Cream City Review* and others. His stories were nominated for the Pushcart Prize both in 2000 and 2001.